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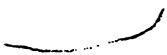




NOTES  
ON  
SHELLEY'S UNFINISHED POEM  
"THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE"







*Of this Book*  
*Twenty-five Copies only have been printed*



NOTES  
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SHELLEY'S UNFINISHED POEM  
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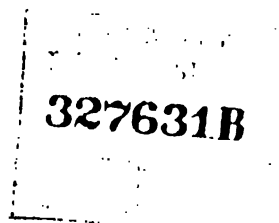
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### NOTES ON "THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE."

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PERHAPS I may be allowed to introduce the present paper on *The Triumph of Life*, with a brief extract from my own *Study of Shelley*, as I wish what I have to say this evening to be taken as an *addendum* to the rather unsatisfactory notice of the poem to be found in that volume.

"The poem," I have there said, "is nothing less than the epic of human life—the tragic story of the Promethean struggle of the Spirit of Man against the disintegrating forces of the world—only begun indeed, but begun on such a scale, and with such a mastery of handling, that the fragment stands, like the torso of a Phidian god, the revelation of regions new and fair in the world of man's creation."

*The Triumph of Life* was, as we know, the last important work on which Shelley was engaged at the time of his premature death, the historical drama, *King Charles I.*, of which such remarkable fragments have been rescued from his note-books by Mr. Rossetti, having been thrown aside for this great philosophical poem. In *The Triumph of Life* and *King Charles I.* we have the first-fruits of the mature genius of Shelley—and both are unfortunately but fragments. The unfinished drama stands in some such relation to the unfinished epic as *The Cenci* to *Prometheus Unbound*; but even *The Cenci* scarcely foreshadows the easy strength of style and the breadth and variety of character-drawing in *King Charles I.*, while the *Prometheus* is, in its whole method of regarding the problems of man's destiny, distinctly immature as compared with *The Triumph of Life*. In these last two poems Shelley touches ground in the actual world, and with no unsure foot, as he never did before.

As a mere piece of poetical composition, *The Triumph of Life* is a masterpiece among Shelley's longer poems. For sustained majesty of verse, concentration of diction, and a certain Dantesque intensity of vision, it stands

alone among his works. ] If we compare the *terza rima* of this poem with that of *Prince Athanase*, it will be seen what progress the poet has made in mere craftsmanship. For imaginative description, combined with subtle and sustained music, it would be hard to match the prelude. Every word seems to shine and palpitate in the rare atmosphere of the verse. The very spirit of a glorious dawn vitalises the whole.

In the vision which this prelude so solemnly introduces, the poet sees a dusty public way thronged with a great concourse of people. This no doubt typifies human life in this world, as opposed to the ideal life typified in those

"fountains, whose melodious din  
Out of their mossy cells for ever burst,"

or actual as opposed to possible life. The multitude, deaf to the music of these fountains,—

"Some flying from the thing they feared; and some  
Seeking the object of another's fear,"

and leaving the true nutriment of life to hunt after vain shadows—

"Pursued their serious folly as of old."



Then follows the fine description of the entry of the chariot of Life :—

" A cold glare intenser than the moon,  
But icy cold, obscured with blinding light  
The sun, as he the stars. Like the young moon  
When on the sunlit limits of the night  
Her white shell trembles amid crimson air,  
And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might,  
Doth, as the herald of its coming, bear  
The ghost of its dead mother, whose dim form  
Bends in dark æther from her infant's chair,—  
So came a chariot on the silent storm  
Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape  
So sate within, as one whom years deform,    :  
Beneath a dusky hood, and double cape,  
Crouching within the shadow of a tomb;  
And o'er what seemed the head a cloud-like crape  
Was bent, a dim and faint ætherial gloom  
Tempering the light."

This personage, compared by Shelley to the "ghost of its dead mother" borne by the young moon, is Life, *phenomenal* life, the "vegetable life" of Blake, which shuts the soul into the dungeon of the body, with the five senses for loopholes of outlook.

Who the charioteer may be who guides "the wonder-winged team" which draws the car of Life is not so easy to come at. He has four faces with banded eyes, and possibly these lines from *Hellas* may throw some light on him :—

" The world's eyeless charioteer,  
Destiny is hurrying by."

The passage which follows is certainly obscure, probably corrupt:—

" Little profit brings  
Speed in the van and blindness in the rear,  
Nor then avail the beams that quench the sun,  
Or that with banded eyes could pierce the sphere  
Of all that is, has been, or will be done."

Mr. Rossetti's suggestion that "that with banded eyes" is equivalent to the charioteer is ingenious, and would give the sense that if not blind the charioteer (Destiny, or whatever it may be) could transcend the phenomenal sphere. It may be interesting to note that the moon is here, as in *Epipsychidion*, a type of the phenomenal, the sun of the ideal; but here the sun is eclipsed by the moon.

Whatever be the interpretation of particular passages, the general sense of the extant fragment of *The Triumph of Life* is clear enough; though what the entire scope of the completed poem would have been is somewhat difficult to conjecture. The great interest of the fragment lies in the fact that, so far as it goes, it is distinctly pessimistic in tone, as no other poem of Shelley's is. In the cycle of earlier poems treating of man's destiny which culminates in *Prometheus*, the ideal is represented

as finally triumphant over the real. The victory is a comparatively easy one, as custom and superstition are supposed to be the great enemies which hold man's soul in chains. Once convince his reason and arouse his will, and his chains are burst for ever. The primitive vital force of the golden age of Nature comes back with a rush, like a river long dammed up resuming its ancient channel. Shelley has not even learned, with Wordsworth, that—

" Custom lies upon us with a weight  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life,"

and scarcely surmised that there may be a bond upon us deeper still—not only almost, but quite as deep as life.

In *The Triumph of Life* he has learnt from experience, and got a deeper insight into the nature of evil. He takes Rousseau as his guide and the interpreter of his vision—the Rousseau of the *Confessions*, bearing the scars of real life, not merely the philosopher of roseate dreams of the regeneration of man. He takes him *because* he is an idealist, but an idealist disillusioned. The tragedy of idealism is finely expressed

in Rousseau's melancholy reply to the question, "Who are those chained to the car?"—

" The wise,  
The great, the unforgotten,—they who wore  
Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreaths of light,  
Signs of thought's empire over thought—their lore  
Taught them not this, to know themselves ; their might  
Could not repress the mystery within,  
And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night  
Caught them ere evening."

Yet it is evident that Rousseau does not regard his own failure as absolute:—

" If I have been extinguished yet there rise  
A thousand beacons from the spark I bore."

He contrasts his own fate and that of Voltaire, whom he apparently classes with "hoary anarchs and demagogues" because he was a spirit of negation:—

" For in the battle Life and they did wage  
She remained conqueror. I was overcome  
By my own heart alone, which neither age  
Nor tears, nor infamy, nor now the tomb,  
Could temper to its object."

This acknowledgment that some defect in himself, not merely in his outward circumstances, caused his defeat, is noteworthy.

The account which he gives of his youth passed in the

presence of a spirit who makes the phenomenal world seem like a dream, is full of Shelley's loveliest poetry. She hovers above the waters of a rivulet, whose murmurs make a music which lulls the aching of the soul in the presence of evil, so that even Shelley himself would

"forget thus vainly to deplore  
Ills which if ill can find no cure from thee."

She is a vision of the Asia of *Prometheus Unbound*, of that goddess revealed through Nature, who is archetypal Nature—the spirit of the Cosmos, or Eternal Beauty. From her Rousseau demands a key to the riddle of life :<sup>1</sup>

"Show whence I came, and where I am, and why,"

and for answer she gives him to drink of her crystal cup. He drinks, and she gradually fades, but for a while remains as a dim presence, more felt than seen, even after the car of Life enters with stunning music,

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<sup>1</sup> Some doubt has been expressed as to whether the hero of this episodic narrative be Rousseau or some new speaker, the leader of the band of Emperors and Popes. I take it the words "replied the leader," line 293, refer to Rousseau, already called "my guide," line 235; and that "the leader" is the simple equivalent of Dante's "Lo Duca," so frequently applied to Virgil. Dante's habit is, however, to call Virgil *Duca* when he acts, and *Maestro* when he speaks—such, at least, is my impression as to his usage; so that he would here probably have said "disse 'l Maestro." That Rousseau should *reply* to an unuttered thought in Shelley's mind is not without precedent in the speeches of Virgil to Dante.

and draws Rousseau into the circle of its influence, to leave him the gnarled and withered thing that Shelley finds him. His description of the haunting of the world with spectral forms—phantoms of dead and dying personalities, which persist as ideas, customs, dogmas, superstitions, is splendid.

"The earth was grey with phantoms, and the air  
Was peopled with dim forms, as when there hovers  
A flock of vampyre bats before the glare  
Of the tropic sun, bringing, ere evening,  
Strange night upon some Indian isle."

There is one passage in this description which is rather obscure. After speaking of the phantoms which haunt kings, priests, lawyers, statesmen, &c., Rousseau goes on :—

"And others, like discoloured flakes of snow  
On fairest bosoms and the sunniest hair,  
Fell and were melted by the youthful glow  
Which they extinguished ; and like tears they were  
A veil to those from whose faint lids they rained  
In drops of sorrow."

I take this to refer not merely to nuns, but to other women whom an external code of morality, which veils their real nature, compels to live, possibly "lamenting some enforced chastity," and certainly stunted in spiritual and intellectual growth.

And this brings us back to that important passage, in an earlier part of the poem, which deals with the ravages wrought by love (or rather its false counterpart) in the world. For, I take it, the description of the dancing crowd, "tortured by their agonising pleasure," distinctly points to sensual love, the Venus Pandemos, as "the fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure was soothed by mischief since the world begun." She is taken as the supreme type of those lower appetites, the gratification of which subjects mankind to the yoke of Life. Maidens and youths meet and mingle in the dance, and fall senseless; and the car passes over them, leaving them

"Old men and women foully disarrayed."

Disillusion and despair or apathy are the result of their indulgence in this "agonising pleasure." That Shelley includes marriage of even the higher type as falling far short of ideal love is evident from the whole drift of *Epipsychidion*, in which Mary is the incarnation of respectable affectionate domestic union. Such union does not satisfy the poetic imagination, because it lacks the fervour and exaltation of passion. How far this

ideal is capable of realisation does not concern the idealist. His business is persistently to demand and attempt impossibilities. Nothing less than a perfect union of body, soul, and spirit can satisfy him, and therefore he demands it in what Byron calls "the nympholepsy of a fond despair." He turns from the lower forms in impatience and disgust—from the dull lust of men and the dull chastity or good-natured self-surrender of women—from all the phases of abortive desire which rend our hearts with sickening excitement, or drug them into torpid sloth—with a cry for some great transfiguring passion which would be indeed the life of life.

The eloquent words of Emilia Viviani, which I give in her own sonorous Italian, give utterance to this disgust and this cry, which are the burden of modern womanhood and the main burden of Shelley's poetry :—

"Ma quanto tu sei profanato, O Amore ! quali oltraggi fanno i figli della terra al tuo nome divino. Sovente agli affetti i piu illeciti, alle azioni le piu vituperose, al delitto (oh ! attentato esecrando) all' istesso delitto si dà il nome di amore, si osa dire che egli lo ha cagionato. Ahi empi ! sacrileghi ! inaudita bestemmia ! voi che non potete risenterlo, non comprendete neppure ciò che la parola amore significhi. Amore vuol di virtù, amore ispira virtù ed è la sorgente delle azioni le piu magnanime, della vera felicità. Amore è un fuoco, che bruciando non distrugge, una mista di piacere e di pena, una pena che porta piacere, un'Essenza eterna, spirituale,



infinita, pura, celestiale. Questo sì è il vero, il solo amore, quel sentimento che soltanto può reimpire intieramente il vuoto dell' anima, quel vuoto orribile peggior della morte."

The following translation is taken from Mr. Forman's  
*Shelley* :—

"But how art thou profaned, O Love! what outrages do not the children of the earth commit in thy name divine! Often and often to affections the most illicit, to actions the most degrading, to crime—ah! execrable iniquity! when even to crime itself they give the name of Love, and dare to tax it with the commission of crime! Alas! unheard-of blasphemy! Impious and sacrilegious that ye are, you not only feel it not, but comprehend not even what the word Love signifies. Love has no wish but for virtue—Love inspires virtue—Love is the source of actions the most magnanimous, of true felicity—Love is a fire that burns and destroys not, a mixture of pleasure and pain, a pain that brings pleasure, an essence, eternal, spiritual, infinite, pure, celestial. This is the true, the only Love—that sentiment which can alone entirely fill up the void of the soul—that horrible void, worse than death."

Shelley is right in regarding love as one of the most potent of spiritual forces—a force which must regenerate or destroy society. The right relationship between the sexes is by far the most important of social problems with which the great revolution, into the vortex of which we are hastening, has to deal. The next century will be the century of women, and it depends mainly upon them whether the relaxation of the marriage bond which is inevitable is to result in a mere sexual orgie, or in something like the higher union of which Shelley

sings. For men the time has come when they must learn a new lesson in self-control or cease to be men. In the revolt against the old morality of restriction, in which

" Priests with black gowns,  
Were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briers  
Our joys and desires,"

much cant is talked nowadays about the evil of asceticism; but without asceticism there can be no progress. Asceticism is the strait gate by which we must enter the kingdom—not the kingdom itself, but the gate. Self-control may be a poor creature in itself, but it is the nurse of all noble passion. But beside self-control we need an immense increase of that imaginative sympathy between men and women which is already springing up. Love speaks through each lover in a tongue more or less unknown to the other, and needs an interpreter. There is a pathetic ring in Mary Wollstonecraft's words to Imlay, "You must appeal to my senses through my imagination—with you, I fear it is different."

In conclusion I must again ask you to excuse a quotation from my own book, as it expresses what

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I feel as to the probable scope of *The Triumph of Life* had it ever been completed.

"The poem ends abruptly with the grand query: 'Then what is life? I cried.' What the answer would have been, and how far it would have been the true one, Shelley has never returned to tell us. That the apparently unredeemed despair of this early portion of his *Epic of Man* would have had some more hopeful sequel; that *The Triumph of Life* would have been no mere triumph of that lower life which is death, may be inferred from the whole tenour of his writings. Perhaps some vision of the divine Love might have appeared to irradiate the gloom of this mortal world. Rousseau says that the bat-like swarm of personal emanations or phantom ideas was

" 'A wonder worthy of the rhyme  
Of him who from the lowest depths of hell,  
Thro' every paradise, and through all glory,  
Love led serene, and who returned to tell  
The world of hate and awe the wondrous story  
How all things are transfigured except Love.'

"We are indeed made to feel, with Prometheus, that 'all hope is vain but love.' If love be not the aspiration of the human soul toward some vital spirit of the

universe ; if it be not the earnest of something ' eternal in the heavens which faileth not,' then life is indeed ' a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' We are but the slaves of the harlot Pleasure, or the prisoners of the stern jailor Duty."





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*March, 1887.*

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the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased by 1.5 million (1990–2000) and is projected to increase by a further 1.5 million by 2020 (Office for National Statistics 2001).

There is a growing awareness of the need to develop strategies to meet the needs of the ageing population. The Department of Health (2000) has identified the need to develop a 'new paradigm' of care for the ageing population, one that is based on the concept of 'active ageing' and 'positive ageing'.

The concept of 'active ageing' is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as 'the process of maximizing the opportunities for health, participation and security in old age' (WHO 1999). The concept of 'positive ageing' is defined by the Department of Health (2000) as 'the process of maximizing the opportunities for health, participation and security in old age'.

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